The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation
Alister McGrath

Notes and commentary

Preliminaries

Alister McGrath is a Northern Irish protestant theologian, an intellectual historian and an Anglican priest. He is currently Professor of Science and Religion in the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Oxford, having previously held chairs in Theology, Ministry, and Education at King’s College London and in Historical Theology at the University of Oxford.

1 The Shape of Late Medieval Thought

A sketch of the ‘religious situation’ leading up to the Reformation.

1.1 The rise of lay religion

Layfolk were more, not less, religious than before in the late Middle Ages. However, an inadequate parish clergy produced resentment of the institutional church:

- ‘Piety and religion... were becoming increasingly laicized’ in contrast to ‘the low quality’ of ordinary clergy, who were often not well-educated.

- ‘The fiscal privileges enjoyed by the clergy were the source of particular irritation.’

McGrath identifies ‘a growing dissatisfaction with the role and status of the clergy within an increasingly professional urbanized, yet still Christian, society’.

1.2 A crisis of authority within the Church

The late medieval period was a time of papal weakness and expanding doctrinal diversity, in which heresy went unpunished and official church teaching was not clarified:

- The Avignon Papacy (1309 to 1377): seven successive popes resided in Avignon, in France, rather than in Rome, a situation arising due to the conflict between the Papacy and the French crown. In this period the papal court increasingly fell under the influence of the French Crown.

- The Western Schism: In 1378 the breakdown in relations between the cardinals and Gregory’s successor, Urban VI, produced the Western Schism, starting a second line of Avignon popes (regarded as illegitimate). The schism ended in 1417 at the Council of Constance.

- The rising influence of William of Ockham (1287 – 1347): In his *Opus nonaginta dierum* (The work of 90 days), Ockham developed a theory of doctrinal authority that denied any pope (or ecumenical council) the right to legislate in matters of faith.

Concerning the growing crisis in authority, McGrath writes:

‘It is difficult to overestimate the impact of the “Babylonian Captivity” of the papacy at Avignon and the ensuing schism upon the medieval church. To whom should believers look for an authoritative – or even a provisional – statement concerning the faith of the church? In a period of unprecedented expansion in theological speculation within the university theological faculties and religious houses of
western Europe, guidance was urgently required as to the catholicity of the new methods and doctrines that were emerging... Furthermore, Ockham had called into question the role of both the papacy and ecumenical councils in such a process of validation, and initiated a debate over this matter...’

‘The development of the astonishing doctrinal diversity of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is probably due to the apparent suspension of the normal methods of validation of theological opinions, together with an apparent reluctance (or possibly even an inability) on the part of the ecclesiastical authorities to take decisive action against heterodox views as and when they arose’.

- **The rapid expansion of printing.**

With the rise of the printing press, new ideas were being disseminated like never before without the same critical regulation¹.

1.3 **A marked development in doctrinal diversity**

Five factors that contributed to ‘the doctrinal diversity characteristic of the later medieval period’:

i. The rise of **distinct schools of thought.** A number emerged during the 13th and early 14th centuries, with differing philosophical presuppositions and methods.

ii. **Disagreement on the nature of the sources** of Christian theology and their relative priority.

iii. An increasingly significant **methodological tension** between the rival logico-critical and historico-critical methods² in the late 14th century.

iv. The **rise of lay piety** as a force for doctrinal development in certain areas of theology.

v. Increasing **confusion concerning the specifics of the official teaching** of the church in certain areas of doctrine during the first decades of the 16th century.

In what follows, we will elaborate on points (i) and (iii), then point (v):

- **Three traditions and three schools of thought**

Whilst **three key schools** of thought were already represented in the Dominican (Aquinas), Franciscan (Bonaventure) and Augustinian (Giles of Rome) orders, ‘The impact of the teaching of Duns Scotus, and subsequently that of William of Ockham and his followers, in the early fourteenth century, led to further diversification within these schools’.

- The old way (**via antiqua**): the traditional realist school of thought.
- The new way (**via moderna**): an anti-realistic school of thought.

---

¹ The invention of movable type mechanical printing technology in Europe is credited to the German printer Johannes Gutenberg in 1450.

² Roughly, the one sought to clarify and precisify a logical structure through which it interpreted key theological texts; the other emphasised obtaining access to critical editions of texts and interpreting them within the historical contexts.
For more details, see Section 3. Briefly:

- The *via moderna* emphasised God’s *freedom* to do as he pleases rather than acting out of any kind of necessity (voluntarism). If God is constrained, it is only by his choice to act in certain ways and then remain faithful to those decisions (covenant).

- It produced a monumental shift in medieval thinking about the created order:
  
  ‘It suggested that the present order of salvation was radically contingent, merely one of a number of possibilities, thus undermining its permanent significance. Far from being determined by the intrinsic nature of the realities involved, it was now seen to rest upon the sovereign will of God’.

  ‘To many critics, the application of the logico-critical method [in the *via moderna*] seemed to lead directly to the complete disintegration of the traditional structure of Christian doctrine, resulting in a Nestorian Christology and a Pelagian soteriology’.

- The *via Augustiniana moderna*, however, should be distinguished as a new-style nominalist movement within the *Augustinian* order that remained *anti-Pelagian*.

### Confusion over official doctrine and theological opinion

‘By the end of the fifteenth century... it was becoming increasingly clear that the distinction between “explicit catholic doctrine” and “theological opinion” was becoming confused’.

Concerning the **doctrine of justification**, the clearest ‘official views’, expressed in the Second Council of Orange (529), were apparently **unavailable to theologians** in the middle ages, who relied on the more preliminary statements of the earlier Council of Carthage (418) against **Pelagianism**. These pronouncements, had they been available, would have restricted the options that emerged in the *via moderna*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tradition</th>
<th>Via antiqua</th>
<th>Via moderna</th>
<th>Via Augustiniana moderna</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pelagianism</strong></td>
<td>Anti-Pelagian.</td>
<td>(Semi-)Pelagian.</td>
<td>Anti-Pelagian.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intrinsic/extrinsic</strong></td>
<td>Intrinsic.</td>
<td>Extrinsic.</td>
<td>Extrinsic.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Intrinsic – involving the intrinsic denomination of a ‘created habit of grace’ (internal change).
Extrinsic – involving only the extrinsic denomination of the divine acceptation (God’s decree).

---

3 From *Wiki*: Pelagius taught that the human will, as created with its abilities by God, was sufficient to live a sinless life, although he believed that God’s grace assisted every good work. Pelagianism has come to be identified with the view (whether Pelagius agreed or not) that human beings can earn salvation by their own efforts. This theological theory is named after Pelagius (354 - 420 or 440).
• The limitations of Luther

Luther’s education and scholarship were situated within the *via moderna*. In a remarkable statement, McGrath (a Luther scholar) concludes

‘... it could be argued that Luther’s comprehensive theological protest against the church of his day was the consequence of an improper identification of the theological opinions of the *via moderna* concerning the justification of humanity before God (opinions which he came to regard as Pelagian) with the official teaching of the church.

For Luther, it seemed that the entire church of his day had fallen into Pelagianism, and thus required doctrinal reformation as a matter of urgency – a judgment based upon the confusion of “opinion” and “dogma.”’

It is surely of significance for the Lutheran Reformation that

‘... Luther’s theological breakthrough involved his abandoning one specific option within this broad spectrum of theologies of justification, and embracing another within that spectrum.’

It is also noteworthy that Luther’s famed sparring partner, Erasmus, a Dutch Renaissance humanist and Catholic theologian, and often taken to represent the Catholic side of the debate,

‘appears... quite unaware of any official teaching of the church concerning the question of what people must do to be saved – a fact that must be taken into account when assessing the “catholicity” of Erasmus’s views on justification’.

• Forerunners of the Reformation.

McGrath dismisses the search for “forerunners” of the Reformation (eg. among medieval heretics).

The Reformation was influenced by currents of thought within the mainstream of late medieval Catholicism (within the *via moderna*).